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Luke Zanoni

University of St. Thomas

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Agent Causal Libertarianism and Moral Responsibility

Luke Zanoni

University of St. Thomas

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Abstract

In his article “Defending Hard Incompatibilism,” Derk Pereboom presents an argument against the compatibility of libertarianism and moral responsibility. In my paper, I first symbolize his argument and present Pereboom’s support of his premises. In short, Pereboom claims that in order for libertarians to claim that moral responsibility is plausible, they must adhere libertarianism of the agent causal sort. He then presents a case, in which he contends that agent causation is shown to be no different than event causation, which leads to the denial of the plausibility of moral responsibility. Secondly, I present a case of my own which shows that the fourth premise of Pereboom’s argument is false, and thus allows a libertarian to avoid denying moral responsibility. Next, I present a response to a possible counter argument from Pereboom, or by a proponent of his theory. Finally, I present a practical reason why the compatibility of libertarianism and moral responsibility is a philosophical position worth upholding.

In his article “Defending Hard Incompatibilism,” Derk Pereboom presents an argument against the compatibility of libertarianism and moral responsibility. In this paper, I first symbolize his argument and then present how he supports his premises. I specifically focus on premise (4) (below) of his argument, deny it is true, and thus show the argument to be unsound. Pereboom presents another argument to support his fourth premise, which I also show to be unsound. I present a case of my own which I believe shows that Pereboom’s fourth premise is false and allows a libertarian to avoid denying moral responsibility. Libertarianism is the theory that we have free will and denies that determinism is compatible with free will. Determinism is the belief that there is only one possible course of future events consistent with present events and the laws of nature (Lowe 56). Moral responsibility of an agent is to say that the agent is worthy of a particular kind of reaction appropriate to the sort of thing that it performed (Eshleman).

I have symbolized Derk Pereboom’s argument against the compatibility of libertarianism and moral responsibility as follows:

- (1) If Libertarianism [L], then it is of the event causal sort [E] or the agent causal sort [A]
- (2) If [E], then agent lacks the control it needs for moral responsibility [\sim M]
- (3) If [A], then agent’s causal powers must be of a different sort than event causal powers [D]
- (4) \sim [D]
- (5) \sim [A] (Modus Tollens from 3, 4)
- (6) If [L], then [E] (Disjunctive Syllogism from 1, 5)
- (\therefore) If [L], then [\sim M] (Hypothetical Syllogism from 2, 6)

Pereboom offers the first four premises in his article and premises (5), (6), and the conclusion logically follow from his premises. From Pereboom's conclusion, a libertarian would have to deny moral responsibility, which is not the sort of thing a libertarian would want to accept because it contradicts a basic component of free will. I will argue that premise (4) is false, and thus his argument is unsound. I will show premise (4) is unsound by refuting his supporting argument for believing that an agent's causal powers are not of a different sort than event causal powers.

Pereboom does not give explicit support for premise (1), but implies that it is the case in his article. He presents the case of the event causal libertarianism, shows that it fails to explain moral responsibility, and then presents the case of the agent causal libertarian. In only addressing these two sorts of libertarianism, Pereboom implies that a libertarian who argues for moral responsibility must be one of the two sorts (Pereboom 243).

Pereboom thinks premise (2) is true because if a libertarian argues that an action is of the event causal sort, then the agent will fall to the "luck" objection (Pereboom 243). Pereboom defines event-causal libertarianism as the "position that indeterminism in the production of a decision by appropriate events is the key requirement for moral responsibility" (243). The luck objection is as follows:

If a decision is nondeterministically caused, and if there remains until it occurs a chance that the agent will instead (at that moment) make a different decision, then there is a possible world that is exactly the same as the actual world up until the time of the decision, but in which the agent makes the alternative decision then. There is, then, nothing about the agent prior to the decision — indeed, there is nothing about the *world* prior to that time — that accounts for the difference between her making one decision and her making the other. This difference, then, is just a matter of luck. And if the difference between the agent's making one decision and her instead making another is just a matter of luck, she cannot be responsible for the decision that she makes. (Clarke)

Because the luck objection shows that the agent does not determine whether a decision transpires or not, the agent lacks the control it needs in order for it to have moral responsibility. Pereboom calls this the "problem of the disappearing agent" (243). In order for a libertarian to solve the problem of the disappearing agent he must reintroduce the agent as a substance, instead of an object involved in events. To clarify, agent causation is an event produced by the action of substance, which we call the agent (Clarke). This agent has the causal power to cause a decision, after considering reasons, and thus has the control that the event causal libertarian's account lacks. Pereboom argues that agent causal libertarianism offers an answer to the luck objection only if the causal power that the agent exercises in making a decision is of a different sort from the causal powers of the events due to event causation, which is premise (3) the symbolized argument (244).

Pereboom believes premise (3) is true because "the causal powers of the events are not the sort that can provide the control needed for moral responsibility" (244). Since the causal powers of the events cannot provide the control needed in order to argue for moral responsibility, Pereboom believes that the agent causal powers must be different or they will fall into the same problem of the agent lacking moral responsibility. Pereboom states that since the powers are of a different sort then "the exercise of agent-

causal power will be ‘token-distinct’ from the exercise of the causal powers of the events” (244). In other words if we had a series of events caused by event causation and a series of events caused by agent causation, we would not expect them to produce the same type of results. We would expect the agent’s power be exercised in a different fashion than the event causal power. Pereboom places a great deal of emphasis on what would be expected, because it correlates with whether or not the two causal powers are of a different sort or not (244).

Pereboom presents a case that he believes supports premise (4). His case attempts to show that the expected results of event-causal power exercised and agent-causal power exercised would have the same results. As already stated, since the expected results would be the same then the powers would not be of a different sort. Pereboom supposes a series of possible actions whose probability of occurring is approximately 32 percent. This case is purely hypothetical and 32 percent is a completely arbitrary probability. Pereboom’s intention is not to present some real series of events, but rather to present a possible case that he can use to compare the two causal powers. He proposes this series of events with a specific probability to show the expectations we have about series of events due to the influence of statistical law. Pereboom claims that in order to have agent-caused free action and affirm statistical law, which he claims is “overwhelmingly likely” (245), the series of events must be freely chosen close to 32 percent of the time for a large number of instances. He further argues that if the occurrence of these events is to be determined by agent causation, then their chance of being chosen 32 percent of the time should be no different than their chance of being chosen 99 percent of the time, but it cannot diverge from the former or it would conflict with statistical law (245). Pereboom states that since we would still expect the agent-caused series of events to be exercised around 32 percent of the time, it would not differ from what we would expect from the event causal powers.

In order for agent causal power to answer the luck objection and the problem of the disappearing agent, according to premise (3) it must be of a different sort than event causal powers. According to the presented case the event causal powers, which are influenced by the probabilities of statistical law, would be expected to be realized 32 percent of the time. Since agent causal powers don’t diverge from the percentage that would be expected of the event causal powers, Pereboom claims that it is not of a different sort than the event causal powers (Pereboom 245).

Pereboom’s case can be symbolized as follows:

- (C1) Agent-caused free action exists [C]
- (C2) Probability of a series of possible actions occurring is 32 percent according to statistical law [X]
- (C3) ([C] and [X]) (Conjunction from C1, C2)
- (C4) If [C] and [X], then over a large number of instances we would expect **the agent causal powers** will cause this series of actions to be actualized close to 32 percent of the time [P]
- (C5) [P] (Modus Ponens from C3, C4)
- (C6) If [X], then we would expect that **due to the causal powers of the events** over a large number of instances this series of actions to be actualized close to 32 percent of the time [Y]
- (C7) [Y] (Modus Ponens from C2, C5)
- (C8) ([P] and [Y]) (Conjunction from C5, C7)

(C9) If [P] and [Y], then the agent's causal powers are not of a different sort than the event causal powers [\sim D].

(C10) Therefore, [\sim D] (Modus Ponens from C8, C9)

From this argument Pereboom concludes that agent causal powers are not of a different sort than the event causal powers and thus supports premise (4) in his first argument. Pereboom assumes (C1) because he knows that an agent-causal libertarian would have to affirm this premise. He holds (C2) to be true because probability states that such a series of events would be expected to occur 32 percent of the time. He states that it is not logically incompatible for them not to be actualized 32 percent of the time, but rather the force of statistical law makes it "correct to expect" it to happen 32 percent of the time (245). Once again Pereboom concentrates heavily on expectations.

Pereboom thinks (C4) is true because agent causation cannot contradict statistical law. In order to not contradict statistical law, we must expect the series of events to be realized 32 percent of the time. Pereboom then affirms (C6) because he relates the power of the events to what statistical law causes us to expect. He says that since we expect the physical components of the events to be realized 32 percent of the time, we can say that the causal powers of the events will cause the series to be actualized that percentage of times. As a result Pereboom concludes that if we have a probability according to statistical law, then the causal powers of the events will be expected to be actualized close to that probability (245). Pereboom believes (C9) is true because both the causal powers of the events and the causal powers of the agent are expected to be actualized under the same probability. He believes that since the agent's expected results don't diverge from the probability that the events would occur purely according to statistical law that the two powers are not of a different sort. In short since both powers are expected to actualize at the same percentage, they cannot be of a different sort (245).

I deny premise (C9) and argue that even though the agent causal powers and the causal powers of the events yield the same result, the agent causal powers are still of a different sort than the causal powers of the events. I provide the counter case to show this: Statistical law says that a fair coin flipped will have a 50 percent chance of it landing on heads. The probability of a coin landing on the heads side will influence the probability of an agent picking up a coin heads side up. For example, let's presume that if a person flips a coin, they will only pick it up if it lands on the heads side. The probability of a person picking the coin up will be about 50 percent. We can thus say that according to statistical law the chance of this series of events happening is 50 percent. Now under these circumstances the person's decision to act will be similar to the expectations due to statistical law. If the person will only pick the coin up if it is heads then we can say the probability according to statistical law will influence whether or not the agent chooses to pick up the coin.

This we can call the event causal power, because the event of the coin being picked up by an agent is influenced by the previous event, that is whether or not the coin landed on the heads side or not. To say that the event of the coin landing on heads causes the agent to pick up the coin would be absurd, because the person (who is a substance) has the decision of whether or not to pick up the coin. The statistical probability is based off the assumption that the person has previously determined to pick up the coin only if it is heads. This statistic does not take into account a situation in which the person decides otherwise and even though the coin landed on the tails side, he still decides to pick it up and thus is the agent cause of the event of the coin being picked up. In this case the event causal power, determines

whether the coin will fall heads or tails, but the person can still choose to diverge from his previous stipulation to pick up the coin (thus being an agent) or deciding not to (thus not being an agent). The situation in which we presented will only fall under the statistical range if the person chooses to do as previously stipulated and chooses to pick up the coin. Since the agent is a person who can choose to diverge from the range of this particular statistic the agent causal power is thus of a different sort, since it has a broader scope, than the event causal powers determined by the statistics.

By the presented case even though agent causation may produce the same statistical actuality as would be expected of event causal powers of statistical law, they are still of different sorts. Since they are of different sorts, and P and Y are true (from (C4) and (C6)), premise (C7) is false. Since premise (C7) is false, the inference to (C8) can no longer be made. Since the argument is unsound, so is his support for premise (4) in the first argument. Furthermore my presented case shows that agent causal powers and event causal powers are of a different sort, which I symbolize as [D]. I replace [\sim D] with [D] for premise (4), and as a result [\sim A] is no longer a valid inference from premise (3) and (4). Further the inferences in premise (6) and the conclusion are invalid and as a result it no longer can be said that if Libertarianism is true then there is no moral responsibility. Most libertarians, including myself, would argue that moral responsibility is an important aspect of a person's free will, but such an argument is outside the scope of this paper. Still it is worth noting, because such a belief about moral responsibility is a motivation for denying Pereboom's conclusion in his first argument.

Pereboom may respond to my counter-case by objecting that it only shows a specific case of agent causation and event causation, but when looked at in over a large number of instances and in a string of events this objection still does not show the two causal types to be of a different sort. I reply that this is not the case because his claim is that "the causal power the agent exercises in making a decision must be of a different sort from the causal powers of the antecedent events" (Pereboom 244) and he makes no distinction between agent exercises over a large number of instances. He lacks a detailed definition of what he means by "of a different sort" so I contend that if one case can show the causal power of the agent to be of a different sort than the causal powers of events, then this is sufficient to refute his case and thus the soundness of his argument.

While the scope of this paper focuses mostly on moral responsibility and refuting Pereboom's argument against a libertarian being able to believe in moral responsibility, this issue cannot be separated from that of free will. A libertarian by definition believes in free will and especially from a Catholic standpoint, to deny moral responsibility would deny a basic component of free will. Thomas Aquinas states that to deny free will "is heretical since it destroys the notion of human action as deserving or undeserving" (McDermott 176). To say a human action is "deserving or undeserving" is another way of saying that a person is morally responsible for his or her actions. To deny that a human agent can be morally responsibly for an action would thus be heretical to the faith. Thus to be Catholic is to believe in free will, and as a result moral responsibility. Pereboom's argument against libertarian moral responsibility is contrary to Catholic teaching because it denies that a person can have moral responsibility. In order to uphold the truths of the Catholic Church, Pereboom's argument must in some way be faulty. I have presented a case, which I believe shows the faulty reasoning of his argument and thus upholds that which the Church teaches about the necessity of free will and moral responsibility.

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